



## A study of Islamic Feminism in Khaled Hosseini's 'A Thousand Splendid Suns': Then and Now.

<sup>1</sup> Payal Raina, <sup>2</sup> Lalit Kane

<sup>1</sup>M.A English, <sup>2</sup>M.A English

<sup>1</sup>Department of English

<sup>1</sup>Hislop college, Nagpur, India

**Abstract:** “Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman” (Hosseini p. 7). This quote reveals the imbalance of power in Afghan society in terms of gender. Khaled Hosseini’s ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ tells the story of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, both victims of patriarchy who are married to Rasheed. Hosseini’s female characters were suppressed by male binary until they fought for their identity. This paper delves into the psyche of woman characters. It focuses on Islamic Feminism and the issues that have been raised in the novel relating to Islamic Feminism. This paper also aims at giving a view into the lives of Islamic Feminist women and what all problems they have to go through.

**Index Terms - Patriarchy, Islamic Feminism, Afghan society, Misogyny, Malala Yousafzai, Zainab Salbi, Taliban.**

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism is the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. “A combination of Islam and Feminism been advocated as a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm” (Margot Badran in 2002). Islamic Feminism is defined by Islamic scholars as being more radical than secular feminism and as being anchored within the discourse of Islam with the Quran as its central text. It is a global phenomenon that is not restricted to any geographical region. Its bravest campaigns have been conducted in Asia and Africa, while some of the boldest discursive articulations of Islamic feminism have appeared in the diaspora and convert communities in the West. ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ is set against the background of Afghanistan’s recent history. This novel is a tale of two generations of characters brought jarringly together by the tragic sweep of war, where personal lives, the struggle to survive, raise a family, find happiness- are inextricable from the history playing out around them. The topic suggests the Islamic Feminism in ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’. As the setting of the novel is Afghanistan, this paper will delve into the lives of females in the light of Islamic Feminism.

‘Islamic Feminism’ is a relatively recent current of thought being developed by a transnational network of activists in widely contrasting socio-political contexts. Islamic Feminists are concerned with developing an ethical reading of the bases of Islam, namely the Quran and Sunna, in order to find a form of religious level that will support their feminist viewpoint. It is therefore legitimate to speak of the production of a new Islamic discourse and, in general terms, of the appropriation of the religious. Islamic Feminism is not simply a feminism that is born from Muslim cultures, but one that engages Islamic theology through the text and canonical traditions. There are many issues that have been raised by Islamic Feminists. Some of them being Personal Laws, Dress Codes and many other issues. There are many issues which have been shown in the novel as well.

“Attention women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a Mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the road, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewelry is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.

You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.

Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar.” (Hosseini p. 271)

The above-mentioned lines show how the patriarchal society has tried to control the women in Afghanistan, particularly during the ultra-conservative Taliban period. And these lines still hold true, in varying degrees, for almost all Islamic societies, systematically depriving the women of their freedom. This is the main issue that Islamic feminists want to fight, to balance the scales in favor of females by demolishing patriarchy, thus making men and women equal, as envisioned in Islam. The issue of Burqa is raised in the novel. Rasheed forces Mariam and Laila to wear Burqa all the time whenever they step out of the house. The lines mentioned above also state that wearing a Burqa was imposed upon the women against their will. According to Islamic Feminist Fadela Amara, wearing a Burqa or a hijab should be banned for various reasons. She said, “The veil is the visible symbol of the subjugation of women, and therefore has no place in the mixed, secular spaces of public school in the system.”

In the novel, Mariam was suppressed by her husband Rasheed. She was chained in the patriarchal society including her husband. The women during that time in Afghanistan and the nearby countries were deprived of their freedom. Laila loved Tariq but could not marry him because Tariq left Kabul and Laila married Rasheed. She still kept meeting Tariq after her marriage. There was no recourse for divorce for her because Rasheed would never give her a divorce. The women were asked to follow so many restrictions, some of them being mentioned above. According to the sources of BBC News, the women in Saudi Arabia are still facing the problems. “It is very hard for them to get the custody of children after divorce if the children are older than seven (boys) or nine (girls). This difficulty is further exacerbated if the woman is not Muslim that is if she is a foreigner living in Saudi Arabia.” Same is the case with women of Israel. They cannot get a divorce without their husband’s permission as the system is ruled by religious courts. The same case can be seen in the novel as well. The novel highlights personal Laws such as Polygamy and divorce. Jalil, Mariam’s father had four wives. Even Rasheed had two wives. Mariam was born out of wedlock after Jalil had a physical relation with his maid. Islamic Feminists are against polygamy. They do not support polygamy. Even Quran does not support Polygamy. Quran has restricted the practice of polygamy and suggests Monogamy as the only acceptable form of marriage for society in general. If a woman thinks of getting a divorce, the men are not ready to give them a divorce because it would not be good for their vanity. Neither can the women leave their husbands because of shame and the society. So, women face all these kinds of problems which the Islamic Feminists oppose.

There have been many education issues prevalent in the novel which still hold true in many Islamic countries. As seen in the above lines the schools were shut down. The girls were not allowed to study. The Islamic Feminists were opposed to this. They thought that it is the choice of girls whether they want to study or not. Since then, women are trying to reclaim their right to education. One such woman is Malala Yousafzai. She is a Pakistani feminist and an activist who fights for the rights of education for the women. She was shot by the Taliban for the works she has done for the education of women. She became the youngest girl to be awarded the Nobel Prize Laureate for all the works she has been doing in her field. She gave a speech at the United Nations nine months after she was shot. She said “The terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage were born.” She also urged action against illiteracy, poverty and terrorism: “The extremists were, and they are, afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women... Let us pick up our books and pens. They are our most powerful weapons.”

We can see the same attack that happened on Malala, in Afghanistan currently. The Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021. The situation got out of control and many people lost their lives. The Taliban held full control of the Kabul International airport on August 31 after the last U.S. plane left its runway, marking the end of America’s longest war and leaving behind a now quiet airfield. Many changes took place because of this takeover. Taliban officials in the restive Herat province have banned co-education in government and private universities, describing it as the ‘root of all evils in society’. Adeeba Qayoumi, a 21-year-old woman who fled to India from Herat, Afghanistan, in 2019, has started an online petition in memory of her 29-year-old cousin Farishta — a civil rights activist killed by the Taliban last year. It is still unclear what would happen in Afghanistan now. But it would also mean a severe rollback of rights for the women as well. Afghan women have made major gains since the overthrow of the Taliban. Many are worried they will once again be confined to their homes. The Taliban have said they are no longer opposed to women attending school but have not set out a clear policy for women’s rights. Afghanistan remains an overwhelmingly conservative country, especially outside major cities, and the status of women often varied, even after Taliban rule.

Mariam and Laila have a strong ability to find strength and support in each other. Laila is shown to be then type of feminist that was the need of the hour at that rime. She was bold enough ton at least stand against the restrictions and find her own way out of patriarchy. There are still many women in Islamic countries which have shown that barriers are just barriers and they are meant to be broken if the need be. One such woman is Zainab Salbi. She is an Iraqi women’s rights activist, writer and public speaker. She is the founder of ‘Women for Women International’ and author

of several books. In one of her interviews with Lifenotes, she said, “Whenever we tell our truth and break our silence, we become like candles that light the way for others out of their darkness until they can find the courage to speak up themselves.” Mariam would never have faced the strength to fight Rasheed if she had not gained confidence and love from Laila. The two women find strength in each other in order to face the misogynist Rasheed. Mariam even sacrifices her life taking the blame for killing Rasheed, in order for Laila to continue on. Mariam was meek and submissive in the beginning, with the support of Laila, she was able to overcome the dominance which was ‘forced’ upon her by Rasheed. This clearly shows that it is only by coming together, mutually supporting each other and presenting a united front in the fight against patriarchy, that women can break their shackles.

#### CONCLUSION:

Khaled Hosseini has very sympathetically and sensitively examined the conditions of Afghanistan, and women in general in this novel. He has shown sisterhood between Laila and Mariam. This paper has tried to highlight the problems which the women go through because of patriarchy. It also helps us in understanding Islamic Feminism clearly and what all had happened then and what has happened now with respect to Taliban. It is evident from the given examples that though there are restrictions on females in the Islamic countries but still there are women who have fought for their identity and made their mark in the society.

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